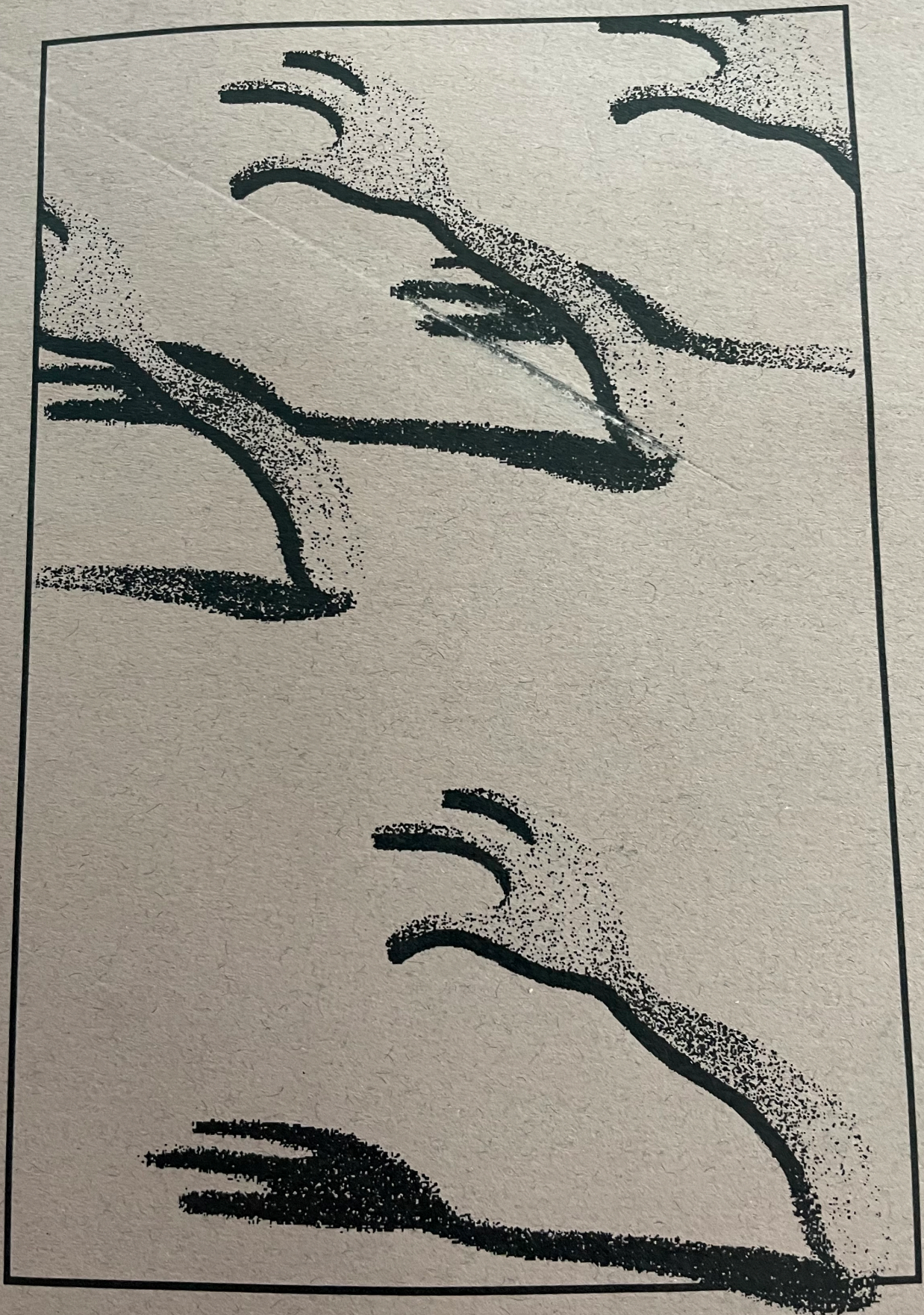


CONFLUENCE



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Carnival Night

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Here is how it happens in Basel:

At three in the morning on the darkest day of February they come down out of the hills with pipes and drums, only pipes and drums, no voices raised in song or laughter, and they make their way to the center of the city, on foot of course, no cars anywhere, and they banish the winter and cry for heat, and light.

She was ten when her father woke her, in Basel, in the middle of the night. He pushed her hair away from her face and said her name and then she was sitting up. She stared at him, silent. "Shh," he said, and that made her speak.

"Why?"

"Get dressed," he said, "we're going out." She could not remember his being in her bedroom before. He took her sweater and pants from a chair and put the sweater over her head, over her pajamas. "Hurry," he said urgently. "And quiet. Let's not wake your mother."

"Why?" she said again. He was holding out her pants, and she took them quickly and pulled them on.

"She's tired," he said, "she needs her rest."

They tiptoed past the door of her parents' bedroom, down the hall to the front door. As she put on her coat and boots by the dim light of the hall lamp she stared at her father's face. It was still, as it usually was, but there was a muscle flickering in his cheek. That was new to her, and she didn't know what it meant.

He led her down the three flights of stairs to the front door of the boarding house. They had lived in this place nearly a year, since his company had transferred him to a new city in a new country, but her parents always spoke of it as temporary. "When we go home..." her mother said, and at night, in bed, she heard her father's voice: "When

we get out of here..." So she had never learned to say German words in the shops, never unpacked her shell collection or memorized the number of steps to their landing in the boarding house.

He paused at the front door and pulled a cap over her head, over her eyes. She pushed it back up and reached for his hand. She was awake enough now to wonder where they were going. Was he angry at her, and taking her outside to tell her so? Was her mother sick, and were they going to get a doctor? "Daddy—" she said, frightened.

"Shh," he repeated, and in the dark she could see that he was smiling.

Outside it was pitch black. He pulled her down the front steps and along the cobbled street that curved down into the town. It was strange, being outside with her father. She saw him mostly indoors: in the early morning before he left for work, watching over his coffee as her mother brushed her hair, or in the evenings when he sat with her at her math homework, looking grave when she got it wrong, just as grave when it was right. That was what she knew of him. On the weekends her mother said, "Your father needs his rest."

Her face was wet—was she crying? No, it was snowing. The flakes caught at her eyelashes, and she stumbled. "I'm cold," she told her father, and then she heard the pipes. The sound was strange and senseless, as though some beautiful wild animal was playing; it came out of the darkness behind them, in front of them. He halted and reached down and swung her up to his shoulders. Holding her knees, he began to walk again; her boots dangled under his arms. He was not wearing a hat, and she held on to his hair. His fingers reached all the way around her knees, thumbs touching fingertips.

Slowly her eyes adjusted to the darkness and she saw a solitary figure walking on the road ahead of them, far in the distance. The tune from his pipe drifted back toward them and washed up against a tune coming from behind, a different tune, or a different part of the same tune. It made her dizzy. She put her hands on her father's cheeks, clasping her fingers under his chin. Beneath her palm the muscle in his cheek fluttered like a wing. She heard a drum.

And then more drums, and more pipes. As they came down into the town she could see figures everywhere in the streets. Some, those who were not playing, held flares high over their heads, lighting up little swarms of snow. The strands of hair falling out of her cap were wet. On each of her father's gloved fingers there was a thin crust of snow.

They reached the square in the center of the town. There were thousands of people, or hundreds; she was never sure about those numbers. The pipers stood in little groups, each group playing a different tune. That was what there was a hundred of, then: a hundred tunes. It was like being in a music box shop where every box had been wound and set playing. And the drums – everywhere, the drums spat their beats into the pool of melodies. She put her hands over her ears and immediately took them away again. “Look, Sarah,” her father cried up to her, “look!”

By the light of the flares she saw that they wore costumes: green and gold smocks, scarlet capes, ballooning trousers with purple stripes. Some wore masks, hideous white faces with grinning black mouths. She put her face against her father’s hair.

The pipes were playing faster and faster, as though the music boxes were all going in reverse, speeding up instead of winding down. The sound made her tremble and she was afraid she would fall. “Put me down, Daddy,” she said into his hair, and he swung her down beside him. He was pressing toward the center of the square, pulling her after him through the crowd. She stared up at him; he seemed suddenly taller. “You’re having a growth spurt, Sarah,” he had said to her recently; was he having one, too? She had been used to thinking of him as unchangeable, incapable of surprise, seldom happy and never sad; seeing him now, his hair thick with snow, his cheek muscle leaping, she was struck by what she didn’t know of him. He crouched down next to her. She was afraid he was going to explain something, even everything, but he only said, “Are you cold now, honey?”

“No,” she said. She though he might have called her that when she was much smaller, back home, but she wasn’t sure; it could have been her mother who said it, or perhaps he had said it to her mother. Over his head, high above the square, she caught sight of a gigantic figure hanging motionless in the dark. It was the figure of a woman, a woman in a great black dress, arms outstretched. Around its terrible face hung ropes of yellow hair. She was afraid then, and wanted an explanation. “What is that?” she whispered.

He glanced up, and his face was pale and eager in the light of the flares. “She is the Witch of Winter, Sarah,” he whispered back. “They are going to banish her.” She didn’t want to ask him what banish was, but the word increased her fear. The figure hung above them, higher than the streetlamps. Hung from what? She knew the thing was not real but she hated its eyes, its reaching arms. As he stood up, she grabbed one of his hands with both of hers. He bent back down again, annoyed perhaps.

"It's a ceremony of rebirth," he told her. "Rebirth, do you know what that means?"

"It means being born—"

"Again."

"How can you be born two times?"

He smiled, staring past her. "Only if you have died," he said, "after the first time. Of course you wouldn't understand. You are so fresh from your own birth, why should you want another?"

"I do so understand," she told him. "Like Jesus."

He nodded, a little bored with that. "Yes, like Jesus," he said, and stood again. She tried to think about Jesus, who had always confused her. Surely he had been born in the spring and died in December; the other way around made no sense. Secretly she thought they had all gotten it wrong.

She saw that all the flares were in the center of the square now, in a circle around the witch. The pipes and drums stopped suddenly. In the wide silence she could hear the witch's gown flapping in the limp wind. Then all the flares dipped and rose and a great roar went up from the crowd. The pipes screamed together, in abrupt shocking unison, and as the witch flamed the crowd began to dance. She closed her eyes to shut out the sight of the fire crawling up the yellow ropes of hair, and then there were hands around her waist; someone lifted her into the air and swung her around. She looked down; a white mask grinned up at her. Another pair of hands reached and grabbed her and she was swung around again above another mask. There was light everywhere. She could not see her father.

She cried out, and her voice was gone; the pipes and drums and snapping flames bellowed around her. Again and again she was lifted and swung, by one pair of reaching arms after another. She grew sleepy with panic and closed her eyes as she flew farther and farther away; higher and higher they tossed her, up into the scorched sky, spinning her around and around in the great white rose of heat blooming in the frozen night. And then finally she was held still, hanging high and motionless like the Witch of Winter had hung, and she opened her eyes and saw her father's face laughing up at her with a mouth stretched wide like the smiles of the masks.

He lowered her and held her, and she looked into his face. It was as though the muscle in his cheek had snapped like a broken rubber band and his smile spread loose and wild. Rebirth, she thought, and memorized it.

Together they looked up. The witch was invisible now and they could see nothing but flames. He turned and carried her away from the crowd, from the fire, back into the cold, and the last thing she saw before she closed her eyes and slept on his shoulder was a drum covered with snow, the flakes jumping and dancing on the taut skin as the drumsticks beat, over and over again.

